



2008 State of the City Address Mayor Harry J. Tutunjian

February 7, 2008

Council President Campana, City Council Members, Distinguished Guests, friends, neighbors, and fellow residents, thank you for joining us for my fifth State of the City Address.

For more than four years, my administration has made it a point to strengthen the reputation of the City of Troy around the Capital District, around New York State, and around the Northeast. We have strived to re-invent ourselves to make the City stronger. We have worked tirelessly so that moving forward we do not just merely survive, but prosper.

Last year the City of Troy teamed up with the Troy Redevelopment Foundation to pursue a branding campaign that would assist our great home in capitalizing on this wonderful momentum swing. It was an idea that we first thought about pursuing several years ago, but will officially begin this year.

The reason for that change is the people you see each day in this City. We are changing rapidly in Troy, and though visible results may lag behind talk, the change is very real, it is dramatic, and it is the definition of encouraging. What I hope to accomplish tonight is to provide everyone a reason to work together, a reason to cooperate, a reason to work for our City in a manner that many have failed to do in the past.

Regardless of political affiliation, we have a duty to fight for our City, and though our opinions on how to do that may differ from time to time, let us never forget that we will always share that motivation.

In that spirit, we approached the branding of the City with an open mind. We wanted something that would be successful, and most importantly, truthful. We sought out the opinions of more than a thousand of people through surveys and in-depth interviews with some of the more opinionated people that call Troy home. What came out of these interviews was a description of Troy that hit the nail on the head.

What are we?

“An eclectic, historic urban environment rich with opportunities to make a difference.”

The end of the statement resonates most in me- “opportunities to make a difference.” Growing up in this area, I was well versed with the dynamics of Troy. Its opportunities and its short comings. Eight years ago I sat where the City Council members sit tonight- as a district councilman. Tonight, I speak to you with direct knowledge of what types of opportunities there are in the City of Troy.

Inside of this statement are keywords developed by Smith and Jones, a downtown based business, that I ask each of you use in your discussions about Troy. As we put this speech together, I thought what better way to kickoff this challenge than to use those words as a framework for this address and what they mean to me.

Eclectic

This word jumps out to a number of people for a number of reasons. And in Troy you will find no shortage of businesses, people, and residents making a run at the most eclectic.

Look down River Street at the ever-expanding Market Block, or Living Room, or the middle-eastern hot spots defined by Marmora Café and Al Baraki.

Take a stroll down Fulton Street where Oliver’s Naturals recently opened, a vegetarian specialty shop that will surely be a favorite stop for the new residents that will soon occupy the former Best Western Hotel. I am referring to a \$22 million project that will replace the old hotel, and bring more than 300 students into our downtown business district. I invite everyone here tonight to a groundbreaking for this exciting project this coming Tuesday morning at 11 a.m.

Head up to Lansingburgh on a Saturday evening in the summer where hundreds of people gather as they did decades ago to celebrate community, music, and being together.

Visit a Valley Cats game, and you see the same themes as in Lansingburgh. People having fun in an area that just several years ago was nearly dormant. Now there is unique and credible entertainment for the entire area.

The reason we sought the help of the Troy Redevelopment Foundation in a branding and marketing campaign was so that we could enhance our image as a welcoming place to be. You may recall that several years ago the Redevelopment Foundation helped us in purchasing a new ladder truck. Tonight, you will hear for the first time the exciting steps we will take in 2008 to bring people to Troy.

I am proud to announce tonight that the City of Troy, along with the Troy Redevelopment Foundation, have come to an agreement to fund a marketing and promotion campaign that will focus more than \$320,000 in advertising on the City of Troy alone, and will not cost the taxpayers in Troy one penny.

The highlight of this campaign will be a summer series of events that kicks off with the Bass Fishing Tournament in May and ends with the 2nd Annual ChowderFest in September, a wildly successful event the first time it was held in August of 2007. In between will be the 5th Annual River Street Festival, an event that drew 20,000 people to downtown Troy on a Saturday afternoon last June.

Joining these three events will be two new adventures. The first comes to us with the collaboration of the Mayor's Office, Tosca Chef Larry Schepeci, and Chef Jim Rhodes. It's called the Troy Pig Out, and for two days in July, we will be the barbecue center of New York State, welcoming professionals and amateurs alike to more than seven blocks of downtown Troy. In an effort to stage this competition correctly, we have written to Governor Eliot Spitzer seeking sanctioning for a New York State Championship, as well as the Kansas City Barbecue Society. I want to thank Chef Larry for jumping on board this idea, just as he did for last year's ChowderFest. And I want to extend Congratulations to him from all of us on Tosca being named the Best New Restaurant in New York State by the New York State Restaurants Association.

The barbecue will be an event to remember, as will the month of August.

For the first time in their history, the Tri-City Valley Cats will host the New York Penn League All-Star Game on Tuesday, August 19th at Joe Bruno Stadium.

Beyond the excitement of this game, we will have new people to impress. Hundreds of baseball executives, scouts, future major league baseball players, their families, friends, and fans will be in Troy for two days. We intend to capitalize on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity by throwing a bash to remember. Teaming up with the ValleyCats, downtown business owners, and residents, we will hold a Fan Festival that will include food, music, player meet and greets, fireworks, and games for kids of all ages. Heck, we may even have a Wiffle-Ball Game in Monument Square.

Each of these events presents the City of Troy with an opportunity to showcase itself in a manner previously neglected. We are a proud, tradition-rich community that continues to fight for itself long after others would have given up. We are being rewarded for that fight and unrelenting persistence. Opportunities are popping up everywhere.

In the next few weeks, crews will begin construction on a \$23 million Hilton hotel on Hoosick Street. In years past, this development would have shocked people on the inside and outside of Troy. Now it surprises neither. People around New York State are talking about the City of Troy as an upstate success story. Those of us who live and work here know that we have a long way to go before we are considered a great success, but to have others discussing this validates the notion of our revitalization.

The new Hoosick Street construction will bring essential tax base to our City, and anchor future development of this area. Late last year I wrote the Department of Transportation to discuss the future of Hoosick Street should the economic development take off as expected. To Governor Spitzer's credit, DOT responded quickly and has already made

several changes to improve traffic flow. Beyond that, they have pledged that Troy would become one of the first communities in the state to be tested with remotely controlled traffic signals.

To the south of Hoosick Street, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute continues to expand in ways that benefit Troy in a number of subtle respects. The Institute's East Campus Athletic Village has broken ground and is under construction following an intensive process with the City Planning Department to ensure that the project would benefit both the Rensselaer community and the neighborhoods surrounding this ambitious project.

Later this fall, the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center will open, bringing with it new opportunities for many. These new opportunities come on the heels of four years in the City of Troy where we began to capitalize on our potential by creating a climate of growth. Where developers once saw stagnation, disappointment, and political infighting, they now are bullish on the City of Troy. They look here, and they see waterfront. They see our historic architecture. They see people willing to work with them to accomplish enterprises that benefit everyone. Let's not change that.

Much has been made of the major developments on Hoosick Street, the Hedley District and Congress-Ferry Reconstruction, all set to begin in one form or another during 2008. What you may not have heard is that we have more than \$11.5 million in proposed investment from smaller projects that will be completed or enjoy significant construction in 2008. It is happening in Lansingburgh, in South Troy, in Sycaway, in North Central, and the East Side. These are private based developments that do not make headlines in newspapers. They are housing developments, business expansions, condominiums, and aesthetic improvements. They are significant signs of a growing City.

They are opportunities.

During last year's address, I proudly announced that during my first three years we saw a 90 percent increase in the number of planning board activities in the City of Troy. That was the ultimate proof that we were indeed growing at a rapid rate. I am proud to say tonight that the number took another dramatic jump in 2007, ending with just over 190 cases reviewed. From 1996 to 2003, we averaged just 89. That is a significant increase that we should all talk about.

Last September we announced that we had a deal in place to move out of this building and into another. Despite the politics that are now embroiled around it, it is a plan that will allow us to capitalize on one of our greatest assets. In short, it is an opportunity. The opportunity only exists for one reason- optimism. It is that optimism that resulted in the City of Troy receiving a \$2.5 million Restore New York Grant to develop this and another site just north of here.

As I said earlier, around New York State, people are talking about Troy. And the word that you will hear most often is "optimistic." From the Hudson Riverfront to the fiscal

condition of the City to the new projects that unexpectedly sprout up from north to south, we have a reason and a right to be optimistic.

It is optimism that spurred me to first talk to Judge Development about this site. To me, this is the test case to see if we have been taught anything by the past. If there is one thing that leaders in Troy have done for the better part of three decades it is make plenty of mistakes. This site is our chance to prove that we have learned our lesson.

When I proclaim that this site is one of our finest assets, it may do more damage to the cause than good. Shortsightedness is something we must get rid of. Though I am confident that we have attained the best possible financial deal for the residents of Troy, the final proof of that is not in the amount of money we receive for this site, but in what it looks like ten and twenty years from now.

It must not be a boondoggle like the Atrium. Nor can it be as restricted as this very building. This site must become something that gives back to Troy. That brings much needed tax base and residents to downtown, and shoppers for the business community. It needs a developer that is a hard, committed worker. It must maintain and improve access to the Hudson River. It must be something that we look back at in awe as something that happened just the way we envisioned it.

I look forward to hearing from the City Council and its committee that is reviewing this proposal. Make no mistake, this building is in need of massive repair, and the millions of dollars it will take to repair it will not equal its worth in the end. But that will not be the worst part. Our failure to capitalize on absolute optimism will be the long lasting legacy of this era.

Optimism and Opportunities are prevalent here for one main reason- the energetic, hard working people that call Troy home.

We have long been known as a place where the energy of our enthusiasts dwarfs the pessimism of the naysayer. Never has that been more evident than today.

Last year at this time we announced a new event called Troy Night Out. It was an idea that would be sponsored and administered by the local merchants' downtown. It was an attempt to bring people back to downtown on a Friday night. It was an attempt to crowd the streets and recall the days when this occurred with no effort- before strip malls and shopping centers.

In a few weeks, organizers will celebrate the one-year birthday of this fantastic event. An event that has garnered awards, respect, and attention from around the entire area. The first year brought frigid temperatures, drenching rainfalls, and holiday weekends. Despite innumerable obstacles, this concept was a success each and every time it took place. Very rare was the time I heard a merchant say they had a disappointing Troy Night Out. Completely absent were complaints from visitors about their experience.

We have been blessed to have several of the organizers of the Troy Night Out event team up with long-time boosters and active business owners to reform the Troy Downtown Collaborative with the intention of establishing a Business Improvement District. We have been down this road before, and it is my hope that this new group of people can find common ground for the downtown and form an entity that will take us to the next level.

Late this past summer I was having lunch at my wife's café when an older couple approached me and asked how they could get up to the RPI campus. After a brief conversation, I asked where they were visiting from. It turns out they were from Connecticut, looking to spend the day with their grandson. It happened to be the last Friday of the month, and I told them of the festivities going on that night. They seemed interested, but I didn't give it a second thought until a few hours later while watching the Shilly Shally fire troupe toss fire around State Street.

As I sat and watched, I saw out of the corner of my eye, the couple was approaching me grinning ear to ear. The woman said she wanted to thank me for letting her know what was happening that night, that the City reminded her of her childhood, the architecture was mesmerizing, and that they could not wait to come back and visit again and again.

Like so many others, this couple ventured into town not knowing much and left with a distinct feeling about our historic architecture, preserved nature and friendly people.

It is our historic traits and preserved neighborhoods that score highly with people around the area. As does the relative affordability of our cost of living.

When we first set out to brand the City of Troy, the reason Smith and Jones was chosen was their conviction that whatever came out of the effort had to be true, otherwise stakeholders would not buy into it, and those that visited would feel resentment at being lied to. Tonight you see the basic results of their research. Compiled from the mouths of more than a thousand people.

Eclectic, Opportunities, Optimistic, Historic, Preserved, Affordable, Energetic and Welcoming.

This is what we are.

As a municipality, we have the chance to build our reputation, change the lingering negative perceptions, and guide the City of Troy into the urban oasis we all want it to be.

We can do this through expanded programs, continued fiscal oversight, and a willingness to put politics aside and make difficult decisions. Tough decisions are what this job is all about. It was making tough decisions that allowed our bond rating to increase to its highest level in more than 20 years during 2007. It is tough decisions that allow us to create initiatives to help the people of Troy.

Since 2004, we have expanded a number of programs that aim to preserve our neighborhoods, while offering those in need a tremendous opportunity. Since taking a series of federally funded programs in-house and modifying them so that those most in need would see that funding, we have had nothing but success.

In 2007, the City of Troy helped 14 families purchase their first home here by providing down payments through the Homebuyers Incentive Program. More than 250 people attended meetings in the last CDBG year looking for help from this program

The Homeowner Code Compliance Grant program has become a monumental success. Applied in more than 72 different cases in 2007, the City of Troy expended \$499,000 in federal money- your money- to preserve many homes throughout the City. Whether it is a shoddy roof, broken windows, drainage issues or any other number of problems that plague older homes, we help the people most in need. As I have said numerous times- this is the definition of preservation. It makes you feel good when you wake up, knowing that the money is going to those in our City that are in need of it most.

As is the case with the Troy Homes Project. While other municipalities have trumpeted programs using this funding source, the City of Troy has stepped to the plate and developed a winner. Late last year, five new families moved into their first home along Project Road. These homes were designed, built, and sold by the City of Troy through a lottery process to five Troy residents. Some are from public housing; others had lived their entire lives in apartments. Now they own a home. Now they own their dream.

We have another handicap accessible house ready to be sold to an eligible person, and plan to build another two homes this year. Last fall, as I was walking through Lansingburgh with Councilman Mark McGrath, we met a family that had a handicap child, and happened to be looking for housing. I am hopeful that in the weeks to come they will be able to purchase the remaining home on Project Road.

We have developed a number of programs to help people that have already invested in the City of Troy, including an initiative that phases in assessment increases for homeowners that make improvements to their structures, and historic tax exemptions for certain areas of the City.

As many of you know, a zero tolerance approach to Code Enforcement was adopted early in 2006 to combat irresponsible landlords. It is working.

When I took office in 2004, we had more than 430 vacant buildings on our Vacant Building Registry. Urban Blight is perhaps the most difficult issue for Northeast Industrial cities to address. In four short years, we have whittled that list down to 286. It is a significant decrease, and something that we are extremely proud of.

Despite myopic cries to the contrary, the City of Troy remains the safest large City in the Capital District. Where other municipalities have larger numbers of people, the crime rates are extraordinarily higher. We do not burrow our heads in the sand when an issue

arises in the City, as some might have you believe. We act. We move a substation. We form a Street Crimes Unit- we do whatever it takes.

Created in the early part of the summer after we recognized a spike in violence in the North Central area of the City, the Street Crimes Unit has been a model of exemplary police work. More than 230 arrests, including 88 felonies, as well as cash, drugs, and firearms off the street. Once this unit was formed, there was a significant drop off in the level of crime. We look forward to an entire year of their work in 2008.

Earlier this week we received some hot-off-the-press news from New York State about the crime numbers for the City of Troy. Our total crime index was down 3.9 percent last year, which included a 7.5 percent drop in violent crime, and a 3.3 percent drop in property crime. This is excellent work by the Troy Police Department, and should be talked about consistently.

During the past four years, I have made it a point to end the speech on a positive note, and in the spirit of good non-partisan politics, I am going to switch that up this year. Tonight I ask the Council to join me in pursuing a notion that politicians have avoided in the City of Troy for more than 35 years, and no, I am not referring to this building.

The City of Troy has not done a citywide revaluation since the 1972 Assessment Roll, a staggering length of time. The intent of conducting a citywide reassessment is to have the City's Assessment Roll be both fair and equitable, therefore being uniform. We are not close to that right now. To dispel one notion- reassessments do not necessarily increase the amount of taxes collected; the purpose is to have the tax burden redistributed fairly.

Because we have not commissioned a revaluation in such a long time, our equalization rate has suffered. A lower equalization rate can negatively influence how much is allowed under STAR exemption amounts; how much of the county tax burden the City bears; how much the City residents pay in school taxes compared to the other towns within the school district, and the way state aid for schools is determined and distributed. This is a serious situation that has been left unattended for far too long.

It could be said that a revaluation is a move few politicians are willing to take. Several years ago my predecessor attempted to perform a revaluation, and I squashed it. At the time, funding was unavailable, and I believed that the cost of it was not something the City could afford. However, in the past four years, we have made dramatic steps in stabilizing our finances, and now have the ability to perform this task without borrowing the money, or breaking the bank. That is a testament to conservative budgeting, increased state aid, and a willingness to make tough decisions.

In a meeting with more than a dozen local developers on Tuesday, Councilman Ken Zalewski, Councilman Peter Ryan, and myself talked about the need to move forward with a revaluation. I am hopeful for their support, and want to recall what someone said to Councilman Zalewski after his honest assessment of the situation.

“It will take some brave people to get it done.”

This will be a tough decision. However, much like the necessity we face to make our tax base grow, this move becomes more important each year. I look forward to meaningful discussion in pursuit of this vital need.

As the leaders entrusted by the people with great responsibility, we have the power to capitalize where so many others have failed in the past 30 years. The pieces are in place. It is our job to make sure we do not lose our course.

Good night and God Bless.